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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 003521

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SUBJECT: INDIAN VIEWS ON CENTRAL ASIA: AIRBASE HOPES AND  
FEARS OF CHINESE INFLUENCE AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Ministry of External Affairs Deputy  
Secretary for Eurasia L. Savithri denied that India was

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establishing a military base in Ayni, Tajikistan, as had been reported in the press, insisting that the Government of India (GOI) was only involved in a civilian project of runway construction at Ayni airbase at the request of the Tajik government and that the GOI had no plans to deploy any aircraft or military personnel to Tajikistan. Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) Central Asian Studies Director K. Warikoo speculated to PolOff July 19 that the airbase rumors had not "come out of thin air," but opined that matters of greater concern to India were the rise of Islamic extremism and the growth of China's influence in the region. In a broad tour d'horizon of Central Asian affairs with PolOffs July 27, India-Central Asia Foundation Director Nirmala Joshi raised the need for enhanced border protection along the Tajik-Afghan and Uzbek-Afghan borders to combat drug trafficking, and theorized that Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were likely to branch out to other countries and become less dependent upon Russia and China for economic and regional security. India has compelling national security concerns in Central Asia, but its lack of capacity -- unlike the Chinese and Russians -- likely compels it to leak aspirational fiction about plans for airbases in order to keep rivals guessing. END SUMMARY.

An Indian Airbase at Ayni?

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12. (C) Responding to consistent media coverage that India is planning on operating a squadron of helicopters at the Ayni Airbase in Tajikistan, thereby establishing an Indian military base in Central Asia, JNU Professor K. Warikoo suggested to PolOff July 19 that the story "did not come out of thin air," though he questioned the sustainability of an Indian military presence in Tajikistan. ICAF Director and Professor Nirmala Joshi could not confirm to PolOff July 27 whether the rumors were true, but noted that an Indian presence in Tajikistan would not be surprising given its history of operating a field hospital at Farkhor near the Tajik-Afghan border to treat Northern Alliance Afghan fighters in the 1990s. Warikoo opined that the U.S. should

be less focused on whether the Indians are planning on operating an airbase in Tajikistan, and more focused on the growing radical Islamization of Central Asia and the expanding influence of China in the region.

13. (C) Ministry of External Affairs Deputy Secretary for Eurasia L. Savithri discounted the rumors July 18, telling PolOff that the Government of India (GOI) was only involved in a civilian project of runway construction at Ayni airbase at the request of the Tajik government. She said the press reports were inaccurate, and that the GOI had no plans to deploy any aircraft or military personnel to Tajikistan. In a July 19 conversation with PolOff, Minister of State for Defense Pallam Raju did not explicitly deny the airbase, but asserted that India would have to look after its energy interests beyond its borders.

"Don't Underestimate China"

14. (C) "Don't underestimate China" in Central Asia, emphasized Warikoo, observing that China has "swamped" Central Asia in recent years, particularly Kazakhstan. Warikoo considered official estimates of 150,000 Chinese nationals in Kazakhstan to be far too low, estimating the actual number to be approximately 1.5 million. Warikoo described gradual but increasingly thorough Chinese integration into the population and economies of Central Asia, a process Joshi referred to as "peaceful expansion." Demographic integration, according to Warikoo, was being driven by a greater frequency of intermarriage. Joshi pointed out that the vast and largely unpopulated Kazakh terrain was ripe for further unofficial Chinese expansion, noting that the unloading of cheap Chinese goods at the Chinese-Kazakh border flooded local markets across the

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region, increasing region-wide Chinese economic influence.

Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Central Asia?

15. (C) Having recently returned from Kazakhstan, Warikoo warned of growing Islamic radicalization in Central Asia, noting that education in madrassas was on the rise. Joshi had a more moderate view, portraying Islamic extremism in the region as latent but potentially disruptive, precariously contained by institutional restraints. She posited that Islamic extremism could only move from a peripheral force to a central threat if it was ignited by a crisis. The strong Islamic opposition in Kazakhstan was limited by its inability to form a workable government, while the Islamic opposition in Uzbekistan faced strong repression, Joshi said.

Drug Trafficking Across Porous Borders

16. (C) Joshi asserted that drug trafficking was a greater threat to stability in Central Asia than Islamic extremism, warning that insufficient attention to border security was creating dangerously porous borders across the region. The Tajik-Afghan border and the Uzbek-Afghan borders were especially problematic, said Joshi, who recommended greater uniformity in customs regulations as a step towards enhanced border protection.

Kazakhstan and Tajikistan: Looking Beyond Russia and China

17. (C) Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, Joshi noted, were pursuing distinct but similarly ambitious regional diplomacy initiatives. Kazakhstan aimed to break out of its geographically landlocked position by looking south for potential sea routes, she said. This initiative reflected both a desire to lessen dependence on Russia, its current outlet to the world, as well as a hesitation to look towards

China, due to Kazakhstan,s distance from the Chinese eastern seaboard, according to Joshi. The main signal of Kazakhstan,s ambition to be a regional player, she added, was its growing promotion of and commitment to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). (Note: CICA is an international security forum involving 16 nations, including India, which was initiated by Kazakhstan in 1992. End note.) Currently, the organization was limited to serving as a platform, Joshi observed, but nonetheless reflected Kazakh ambitions for future regional cooperation. Tajikistan also intended to look beyond Russia and China for security concerns, Joshi speculated, a trend she estimated would become increasingly evident over the next five to ten years.

Comment: More Dreams Than Reality

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18. (C) Comment: While the MEA steadfastly denies that India is planning to establish a military base in Central Asia, the recurrent rumors serve to make Pakistan and China nervous. The possibility that these stories are leaked from the GOI itself and reflect its hopes cannot be ruled out. As Raju points out, the presence of an Indian military base in Central Asia would not, in and of itself, guarantee India's energy security. As members of organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and CICA, India continues to keep a watchful eye on Central Asia, but has yet to exploit its full potential as an investor in the region. In addition, New Delhi's capacity to rival China or Russia is still insufficient, perhaps resulting in aspirational leaks about hoped-for airbases in order to keep these powerful rivals off-base. End comment.

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